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ABSTRACT

Despite the proliferation of subject matters in the English curriculum, formal education continues to concede a priority to literature and the linguistic arts. In the past, the English curriculum has been shaped largely by essentialistic forces with an emphasis on skills. This position has been challenged by a strong existential trend in the last decade. In designing an effective secondary English program, it is important to have clear objectives that allow students to achieve their own self-realizations. Humanistic methods of instruction which emphasize the building of intellectual power by production of demonstrable skills are necessary. (A strategy for implementing unit teaching, combining team teaching in an open classroom with individualized instruction, is explicated and recommended by the author.) (Author/TS)

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SECONDARY SCHOOL

ENGLISH: OBJECTIVES & PROGRAMS

Response to NASDTEC*Standards, 3.4 Standard II

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Culture is communication, and even the most primitive human communities exist by it. Their structure is conferred by their carefully nurtured oral literature. The education of the young into tribal citizenship begins with their exposure to the group's myths and fables, and never moves far from their lessons. Societies need literature for survival.

The first formal schools were quite probably mandated by the need for record-keeping in an increasingly complex society. Written records are essential to social progress beyond a certain stage, but such records demand training in use of uniform symbols. Schooling has added a variety of symbols systems (i.e. disciplines) to the syllabus, but has always conceded reading and writing to be the very core of formal education.

When Isocrates, the first great educational theorist, sought to train up the perfect citizen for 4th century Athens, he elaborated an ideal of literary humanism. The orator, the good man who speaks well, would from his time onward be a dominant model in education. Indeed, the axis of evolution of western education would be the pursuit of literary and linguistic achievements, so much so that, until the last century, the history of education is the history of the teaching of grammar, rhetoric, composition and logic.

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Different approaches to linguistic skills, of course, characterized different periods. The Middle Ages, which had all but lost fruitful contact with the classics, preferred to view grammar and rhetoric less as techniques of literary expression than as analytic tools for clarifying philosophical and theological propositions. The Renaissance began with unrestrained appreciation of the spirit of the classical languages and degenerated into slavish imitation of their forms. It also saw the modern science of grammar through its awkward adolescence and reluctantly welcomed the vernacular to literary use.

It is not surprising to consider, therefore, that despite the proliferation of subject matters in the curriculum in the last two centuries, formal education continues to concede a priority to literature and the linguistic arts. Moreover, these no longer exist in disparate, nonarticulated chunks, but have been welded together into the subject area generally known as English or English language arts, a discipline so central to schooling in our society that a recent study indicated that in American secondary schools English classes have an enrollment of 92.9% as opposed to 68% in social studies and 55% in mathematics.[1]

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This subject matter area has acquired its rationale from a variety of sources, most pivotal of which have been the reports of various task groups. The first significant group of this sort was the National Education Association's Committee on College Entrance Requirements, whose justification of English in the curriculum postulates a number of objectives:

> The committee presents first the proposition that the study of the English language and its literature is inferior in importance to no study in the curriculum. It offers all, or nearly all, the opportunities for mental training afforded by the study of any language, it introduces the pupil to the literature of his own tongue, which must always be the chief source of his own thought, inspirations, ideals, and aesthetic enjoyment, and must also be the vehicle of his communication with his fellowmen. Hence this study should be placed in a position at least not inferior to that allotted other languages. 2

The mention of mental training aside, the substance of this statement is still sound currency.

In 1917, a joint committee of the National Education Association and the National Council of Teachers of English reported on the reorganization of English curricula in the secondary schools. The report contended that the subject matter of English properly consists of activities rather than of information, insisted that items of knowledge be made relevant to the life of the learner, and assigned cultural, social, vocational

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and ethical values to the study of English. It was far ahead of its time in all prescriptions except its recommendation that "practical English" separated from "literary English."[3] A later report, that of the NCTE's Committee on the Place and Function of English in American Life in 1926 recommended increased attention to oral expression.[4]

In 1936 a commission of one hundred teachers from all levels of education produced a significant report, An Experience Curriculum in English. The commission held that communication skills must be taught by actual experience in lifelike situations, that schools should teach "instrumental" grammar aimed at helping the individual to immediate improvement in speaking and writing, and that understanding and enjoyment should be valued above factual knowledge and familiarity with form in the teaching of literature.[5] The priority in the curriculum of the utilitarian aspects of the English language arts was reinforced by the 1938 report of the Educational Policies Committee formed by the NEA and the American Association of School Administrators.[6]

Shortly after America's entry into the Second World War, the NEA Committee on the Basic Aims of English produced an elaborate and innovative formulation of objectives:

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1. Language is a basic instrument in the maintenance of the democratic way of life;

2. Increasingly free and effective interchange of ideas is vital to life in a democracy;

3. Language study in the schools must be based on the language needs of the living;

4. Language ability expands with the individual's experience.

5. English enriches personal living and deepens understanding of social relationships;

6. English uses literature of both past and present to illumine the contemporary scene;

7. Among the nations represented in the program in literature, America should receive major emphasis;

8. A study of the motion picture and radio is indispensable in the English program;

9. The goals of instruction in English are in the main the same for all young people, but the heights to be attained in achieving any one of them and the materials used for the purpose will vary with the individual need;

10. The development of social understanding through literature requires reading materials within the comprehension, the social intelligence, and the emotional range of the pupils whose lives they are expected to influence;

11. English pervades the life and work of the school;

12. English enriches personality by providing experience of intrinsic worth for the individual;

13. Teachers with specialized learning are needed for effective instruction in the language arts. 7

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This report's emphasis on enjoyment was soon echoed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Ten Imperative Needs of Youth, which stated, in carefully chosen words, that "all youth need an appreciation of literature, art, music, and nature."[8]

In 1945 a committee of the faculty of Harvard University issued a pivotal report on the goals of American education. Essentialist in its orientation, the report contended that the study of literature affords "direct access to the potentialities and norms of living as they are presented to the mental eye by the best authors. All the other aims in the teaching of literature are subordinate to this."[9]

In the late forties, the NCTE formed a Commission on the English Curriculum to review the question of objectives. Postulating that the major purposes of education are the cultivation of wholesome personal living, the development of social sensitivity and effective participation in group life, and preparation for vocational competence, it proposed that English programs help achieve these by aiming at

1. Mental and emotional stability
2. Dynamic and worth-while allegiances through heightened

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moral perception and a personal sense of values

3. Growing intellectual capacities and curiosity
4. Increasingly effective use of language for daily communication
5. Habitual and intelligent use of mass mode of communication
6. Growing personal interests and enjoyment
7. Effective habits of work
8. Social sensitivity and effective participation in the group life
9. Faith in and allegiance to the basic values of a democratic society
10. Vocational efficiency.[10]

By the end of the next decade, James Bryant Conant, in his essentialistic report, The American High School Today, displayed impatience with tendencies to emphasize enjoyment and self-realization in recommending heavy concentration on the discipline of composition:

> The time devoted to English composition during the four years should occupy about half the total time devoted to the study of English. Each student should be required to write an average of one theme a week . . . . To test the ability of each student in English composition, a schoolwide composition test should be given in every grade; in the ninth and eleventh grades, these composition tests should be graded not only by the teacher but by a committee of the entire school. Those students who do not obtain a grade on the eleventh-grade composition test commensurate with their ability as measured by an aptitude test should be required to take a special

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course in English composition in the twelfth grade.[11] In 1963 the NEA Project on the Instructional Program of the Public Schools echoed this emphasis in stipulating that "priorities for the school are the teaching of skills in reading, composition, listening, speaking . . . ."[12] Most recently, the Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education has distinguished process goals, including several such as knowledge of self, appreciation of others, and appreciation of the achievements of man, which are at least partly the province of English language arts, from content goals, the first of which, achievement of communication skills, specifies that

> the secondary school must ensure that every student masters the basic skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Mastery should be acquired through a wide variety of appropriate experiences and activities in each of the skills areas. The high school has an obligation to certify that every graduate has mastered the skills of reading and writing to a level of functional literacy. 13

While the report says no more about the English language arts, one is justified in concluding that its intent is that emphasis on production of skills should not deaden the more humanistic onjectives of the study of English.

In the welter of objectives thus advanced, there is much disagreement and some confusion. We have not been able to achieve

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consensus even on the central aim of the English curriculum. Conant, we have noted, would devote fully one half of the English curriculum to composition; Sauer feels that the focal point of the English curriculum should be language study; and a recent survey has demonstrated that in fact 52.2% of time in English classes is devoted to literary studies and considerably more attention is devoted to concepts important to literature than to those identified with language, rhetoric, or composition, while composition work occupies only 15.7% of class time.[14]

At least part of the difficulty has to do with changing styles in American educational thought. When the NEA Committee on College Entrance Requirements reported in 1899, Idealism was still a powerful force in educational theorizing, and the committee accordingly stressed the study of literature as the font of ideals, inspiration and aesthetic enjoyment, an emphasis not again dominant until the 1945 Report of the Harvard Committee, which committee included in its number and Idealist educational philosopher. During the first third of the century, Realism and Experimentalism dueled for philosophic supremacy in education. The reports of NEA committees, conferences and commissions defended Realist postulates until Experimentalism was well on the decline and then made a variety of concessions to Experimentalist

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The latter fifties saw the hardline Realists, Conant, Rickover et al triumph. We are thus accustomed to formulations of objectives which emphasize skills, e.g. "the English curriculum is dedicated in part to the development of language skills in the individual—skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening—and the use of these skills both in ordinary communication and in the process of reflective thought."[15]

Yet the essentialistic emphasis on skills has been strongly challenged by a strong trend toward Romantic Naturalism and Existentialism in education during the last decade. Concessions to that current of thought have mixed a new emphasis on self-realization with the continuing emphasis on useful skills. We are thus accustomed to seeing such formulations as:

1. Young people should be helped to perform adequately the language activities of daily life . . . .
2. Today's program should help boys and girls understand the role of communication and its methods in the world today . . . .
3. Today's programs should help boys and girls find deeply satisfying experiences in literature that will help them grow in socially approved directions . . . .
4. Through the use of language, as well as through the use of literature, students should have frequent opportun-

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> ities to explore their ideas, their emotions, and their reactions to other people and to their physical environment, 16

or, more succinctly put:

> The developing experimental and innovative programs in language arts are based on goals which may be stated rather simply:
>
> 1. Clear, thoughtful, and correct speech and writing
> 2. Intelligent listening
> 3. Critical thinking
> 4. Development of a lifelong devotion to literature as a guide to cultural understanding and individual development. 17

The tendency to emphasize the individual development of the student as an objective of literary study in particular is quite strong. The National Study of High School English Programs reported in 1968 that "students' development through literature was ranked as the primary objective of literary study by 62 out of the 102 department chairmen reporting, second by 23 more."[18]

One can, of course, multiply objectives. Literature can be viewed as being studied for pleasure, as a record of man, for self-understanding, as a moral force and as art; written composition can be said to be pursued as a means of getting into and surviving in college, for use in daily life, as an aid to clear thinking, and to gain power over language.[19] Yet phoenomenology

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intervenes; a study such as the National Study of High School Programs is able to tell us that some objectives dominate, others are less valued, and some are given short shrift. Without this sort of sheet anchor, it is possible to claim much too much for the study of English, as in the apocalyptic view that English

> . . . stands between us and that mushroom-shaped column of smoke. Society requires an approach to English content that hold off an atomized world, that promises control of ourselves, of the world around us, and of insights into others and the world's past, present, and future. 20

In designing a sensible secondary English program, one ought to avoid overblown and fuzzy objectives, let the student achieve his own self-realization (as, indeed, only he can), aiding him chiefly in innovative and humanistic methods of instruction and suggestion of worthy reading, hewing all the while closely to content objectives which emphasize the building of intellectual power by production of demonstrable skills.

The best-conceived objectives cannot be achieved through slipshod and careless teaching techniques. We may talk of the power of literature to promote personal development, but if we inflict Silas Marner on our pupils, as did over 40% of American secondary schools in 1968,[21] we have done a great deal to shut the power off. The report of the Harvard Committee rightly discouraged

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> Stress on factual content as divorced from design
>
> Emphasis on literary history, on generalizations as to periods, tendencies and ready-made valuations—in place of deeper familiarity with the text
>
> Strained correlation with civics, social studies
>
> Overambitious technical analysis of structure, plot, figurative language, prosody, genre
>
> Use of critical terms . . . as tags, coming between the reader and the work
>
> Didacticism: lessons in behavior too closely sought[22]

To these we may add teaching language as a static entity, as thought all rules were unamendable, as if skill is linearly related to time spent on routine exercise and other common abuses.[23]

What, then, is to be done? One possibility is to unify all of the elements of English language arts, teaching them simultaneously in conjunction with each other. This

> . . . provides a natural setting for well-motivated learning. It places the skills of communication where they belong—in purposeful activity in a social setting. It demands orderly planning and assumption of responsibility for carrying out the plans. It furnishes opportunity for extensive group work and for individualized procedures to meet the needs, the interests, and the capacities of all members of the class. It stimulates curiosity and creativeness, giving those with unusual powers of self-direction a chance to forge ahead on their own. Yet it keeps the entire class working together on a common problem. It permits the use of all types of literature—new and old, prose and poetry, easy and mature—and the

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> development of skill in reading each of them. It recognizes the place of the library in the learning activities of the classroom and teaches economical of the facilities available. It takes advantage of the natural relationships between speaking and listening and writing and reading in the normal pursuit of well-integrated problems. It gives opportunity for enjoyment of literary selections by the class as a whole and at the same time develops personal standards of literary appreciation and personal habits of reading to suit individual interests. 24

An effective strategy for implementing unit teaching combines team teaching in an open classroom with individualized instruction in a group composed of about 100 students and five teachers. The curriculum is actually a series of mini-courses, each one treating of a concept significant in English or American literature. Each concept involves the reading of certain literary works. Each student would complete such reading, whether alone or in a group, and would then complete a number of related tasks, e.g. attending lecturettes, participating in discussions, role-playing persons, virtues, and the like, programmed learning, library research, etc. These activities would be designed so as to afford the student a variety of means of gaining insights into the literary works, speaking about them, writing about them, analyzing them, studying grammar in conjunction with them. In order that these not be simply cosmetic change, each mini-course must be planned on the basis of carefully chosen behavioral objectives. Moreover, the teachers must take care not to set

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the students tasks that amount to no more than busy-work. Rather, students must be challenged by questions and problems to which the answers are not easily available or forthcoming in a clearcut manner. In this way, the teaching of secondary English can choose and achieve worthy objectives.

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NOTES

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[3]James F. Hosic, The Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917).

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[6]Educational Policies Committee, The Purposes of Education in American Democracy (Washington, D.C.: NEA & AASA, 1938), p. 50.

[7]Dora V. Smith, "The Basic Aims of English Instruction," English Journal, XXXI (Jan. 1942), 40-55.

[8]Planning for American Youth (Washington, D.C.: NASSP, 1944), p. 43.

[9]General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945), p. 107.

[10]NCTE Commission on the English Curriculum, The English Language Arts in the Secondary School (N.Y.: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956).

[11]James Bryant Conant, The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 50-51.

[12]Dorothy McClure Fraser, Deciding What to Teach (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1963), pp. 221-222.

[13]The Reform of Secondary Education: A Report of the National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 32-34.

[14]Conant, pp. 50-51; Edwin Sauer, English in the Secondary School (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), p. 2; James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee, The National Study of High School English Programs: High School English Instruction Today (N.Y.: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), pp. 93, 141.

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[15]Edward A. Krug, The Secondary School Curriculum (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 19600, p. 237.

[16]Harl R. Douglass, The High School Curriculum, 3rd ed. (N.Y.: The Ronald Press Co., 1964), pp. 405-406.

[17]Weldon Beckner and Joe D. Cornett, The Secondary School Curriculum: Content and Structure (Scranton: Intext, 1972), p. 309.

[18]Squires and Applebee, p. 94.

[19]Theodore W. Hipple, Teaching English in Secondary Schools (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 53-75, 142-146.

[20]Abraham Bernstein, Teaching English in High School (N.Y.: Random House, 1961), p. 13.

[21]Squires and Applebeee, p. 100.

[22]General Education in a Free Society, p. 110.

[23]Arthur Pearl, The Atrocity of Education (St. Louis: New Critics Press, 1972), pp. 188-204.

[24]The English Language Arts in the Secondary School, p. 112.